Distr.
GENERAL

A/CONF.172/7/Add.3
22 April 1994

Original: ENGLISH

Item 10 (a) of the provisional agenda*

NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION: VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

Technical session

Addendum

Coping with drought in southern Africa

Summary of presentation by Ms. Derrina Mukupo, Nutritionist, Zambia

1. The drought that affected more than 20 million people in the countries of southern Africa from 1991 to 1993 was the worst in living memory. Despite endemic poverty, conflict and extensive environmental degradation throughout much of the region, massive starvation and death were, however, avoided. The credit for this goes mainly to the families and communities that still maintain the African tradition of strong family and kinship ties and understand the value of mutual support and sharing. The contribution of national Governments, and particularly their unprecedented levels of collaboration and coordination on a regional basis, provided vital support to the affected communities.

2. In a drought situation, children suffer first from the lack of food and succumb to the effects of malnutrition. Rural households are the most affected and in southern Africa, the vast majority of small-scale agricultural production is done by women. Therefore during the drought of 1991-1993, it was the women, and the children dependent upon them, who had the most to lose. In female-headed households, women found themselves struggling to combine their roles as mothers and providers with the additional survival tasks of foraging for food, searching for water, seeking employment for food or cash, and trying to find time to take their children to the supplementary feeding sites.

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* A/CONF.172/1.

3. Among the coping strategies employed at household level, the most significant was that of family members supporting each other and helping friends and neighbours. In addition, families diversified their incomes through enrolling in food or cash for work programmes. Only when the situation became absolutely impossible did families resort to selling off their livestock or other assets. They understood the need to protect these as long as possible as they would be crucial for recovery when the drought was over. Ultimately, when all else failed, families migrated to other areas or to special camps where water was available and food aid distributed. Among the more "modern" coping strategies employed by many mothers was immunization and use of oral rehydration salts to reduce the vulnerability of their children.

4. At the level of national Governments, vulnerable groups were identified and targeted for the provision of food aid and supplementary feeding for children. Labour-intensive public works programmes and community-oriented food and cash for work schemes, as well as agricultural grants, subsidies and input, were provided.

5. A key element in the success of national drought management programmes was the unprecedented level of collaboration and coordination in the region between the member States of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). From early warning systems, through a consolidated international appeal for aid, to joint transport and logistics operations, it was a model of how such regional cooperation can be effective.

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